

**Homily, St. Andrew's
Proper 30C, Oct 23, 2016
Luke 18:9-14**

Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be ever more acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer.

One of the most unique prayers in our Anglican tradition, written by the original author of our prayer book, Thomas Cranmer, begins: "We do not presume to come to this thy Table, O merciful Lord, Trusting in our own righteousness, But in thy manifold and great mercies." It is a much loved and a much maligned prayer, largely because of the line that follows: "We are not worthy so much as to gather up the crumbs under thy Table." The strength of the language is offensive to many and is used as one of the common reasons for not attending church or participating in Christian spirituality. I have often heard people say things like: "I don't need to be told what a terrible person I am!" And yet I don't think of myself, and I hope none of you think of yourself, as terrible people, as lower than worms not worthy of anything at all. The problem comes when we stop at that one line and miss what follows: "But thou art the same Lord, Whose property is always to have mercy..." It's called the "Prayer of Humble Access" ... and it's not meant to make us feel bad, but to help us recognize God's grace. This can, admittedly, be a difficult distinction to discern in the jumble of our emotional, mental and spiritual lives. And yet it is a critical one. We must not presume, but pray, with humility.

Our Gospel passage today is also about presumption, prayer and humility. The narrator tells us right off the top that the parable is about those "who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt." And then the story begins by identifying the 2 main characters, a Pharisee and a tax collector, both headed to the temple to pray. The Pharisee separates himself from anyone who might be unclean, and standing by himself, he prays: "God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income." The prayer is one of thanksgiving, but it's self-serving thanksgiving that focuses on himself. After addressing his prayer simply to God, his first word is "I" and actually includes nothing about God. As one commentator notices: "The Pharisee asks nothing of God. He presumes, rather, that he is not a sinner and that his fasting and tithing are ample evidence of his piety." (NIB, 342) The sad reality is that he may well be correct. He may well be a faithful and pious man who has no need of God. This Pharisee has enough religion to be virtuous, but not enough to be humble.

The prayer of the tax collector, on the other hand, stands in sharp contrast. He also stands apart from the crowd, only he is not looking up towards heaven as would have been a common posture for prayer, instead he beats his breast in grief. He too addresses his prayer simply to God, but then continues with his plea: "be merciful to me, a sinner!" His prayer presumes nothing, but hopes for grace in the form of mercy. And so unlike the other, this man who was so acutely aware of his unrighteousness, finds acceptance in God. The tax collector knows he has failings but I hope that in the act of going to the temple to pray, he also knows that he is loved and not putting on a show of being "the best of the worst"! The story says he went home justified and so we can only assume that his moment of confession and beating his breast lead to true repentance,

a change of heart, and he didn't continue to wallow in his misdeeds, refusing to accept God's mercy and grace.

I once heard a leader in our church describe the three major spiritual challenges of our day, for our generation, as fear, despair and pride. The main reason for all three can be traced to the decline of the church - decline in social status, decline in numbers, decline in social power and influence, decline in financial and other forms of security. The decline has made us chronically fearful, despairing and full of pride and just as importantly its flipside of low self esteem. But there is a way forward, and this same leader described the necessary responses to each: our response to fear must be trust - trust in God, trust in the community, trust in ourselves; our response to despair must be hope; and our response to both pride its shadow of low-self-esteem must be humility.

You'll have noticed by now that I'm putting pride (thinking too highly of oneself), and low self-esteem (thinking too lowly of oneself), in the same category and with the same antidote. Both pride and low self-esteem along with their more insidious manifestations in self hatred, arrogance, shame, and vanity, to name a few - are problems because they make us either the centre or non-existent... they make us the god or the devil... they make us everything or nothing. Neither side is okay. Indeed both pride and low self-esteem are sinful because both separate us from the community around us and from communion with God. To believe we are worthless denies God's presence in us and to believe we are somehow better than the sinner next to us is to deny God's presence in them. The deep challenge of our faith is to understand ourselves as sinners, while also recognizing our fundamental worth and value as beloved children of God.

True humility is seeing ourselves clearly, no better and worse than the people around us and around the world. Humility is not self abasement... it isn't about dismissing complements or praise of our work or appreciation for our character as in "It's all and only about God" anymore than it is about dismissing the good work of others, or the chances and randomness of life, or believing that we are in control as in "It's all and only about me." Genuine humility is only possible when we see and know our own value and know that it is not just about us. Humility is knowing our limits, even as we push them, and discerning between what is our responsibility and what is God's responsibility. Humility is confessing our sins, accepting forgiveness and trying again - perhaps on a different path. Humility is realizing that we still have lots to learn, even as we have plenty to offer. Humility is about not presuming we are worthy based on our own righteousness but trusting in God's abundance, grace and mercy.

As a community of Christian pilgrims, humility means recognizing that, as the church, we really don't know what we are doing in and for the 21st century. It is recognizing that how we have been expressing our faith and our belief, how we worship and how we live our Christian journey hasn't connected well with younger generations, even as it has meant so much to us. In our fear of decline, we have flip-flopped between pride and low self-esteem, and we have too often withdrawn from the culture around us - thinking ourselves too good or nothing at all - in turn.

If the antidote to both pride and low self-esteem is humility, then the only way forward is to admit that we have a lot to learn and that we have a lot to offer. Living our faith together with humility is about trusting in the scripture, tradition and reason on which our church was built and risking that not only can we re-think, re-discover and re-open those things, but that others can

and must be part of the process too. If there is a master plan here at St. Andrew's at all, it is simply these 2 things: being open to the new, strange and surprising intrusion of God; and engaging - leaning in - to the discomfort, anxiety and uncertainty that comes with it. The goal is also simple... it is to develop a truly multi-generational community of Christian disciples. The plan to get there is to be open and to engage with questions, un-knowingness, experimentation... it is simple and it is difficult because it means that we have to show up, confess when we have gone wrong, trust in God's mercy, and then try again, try something else. Such a plan is uncomfortable, I know... I don't like living with the vulnerability and uncertainty any more than you do but engaging with openness in relationship with God, with one another, and with the community at large is how we will find our way together.

More than that, it is an act of humility to let ourselves and our community be shaken because we trust in the mercy and faithfulness of God. It is an act of humility to resist the temptation to try and control what happens next and instead pay close attention, watch and listen intently, to see where and how the Holy Spirit is already working. It is an act of humility to honour the past while not trying to hold on to it or re-build it. It is an act of humility to give our all, to risk everything we have and believe, so that others may experience the kind of love, support, peace and joy, so many of us at St. Andrew's have known for decades. It is an act of humility to try new ways of doing things and to get to know new people, until we find what connects who we have been in the past with who we want to be in the future, while living the grace and beauty of today. This is true for us as a community just as much as it is for each of us individually, as we continue to grow and develop as disciples of Christ.

As we receive God's grace this morning in the forgiveness of our sins, through bread broken and wine poured out, let us not presume but pray in humility. May we lean in to God's mercy as we try and fail, succeed and fall; as we practice great piety and make mistakes. May we remember we are sinners and we are beloved and thereby may we be open to God's new work and new life in and among us.